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Socialism in the United States, a brief history

Harry Wellington Laidler

SOCIALISM

IN THE UNITED STATES

A BRIEF HISTORY

by DR. HARRY W. LAIDLER

LEAGUE FOR INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY

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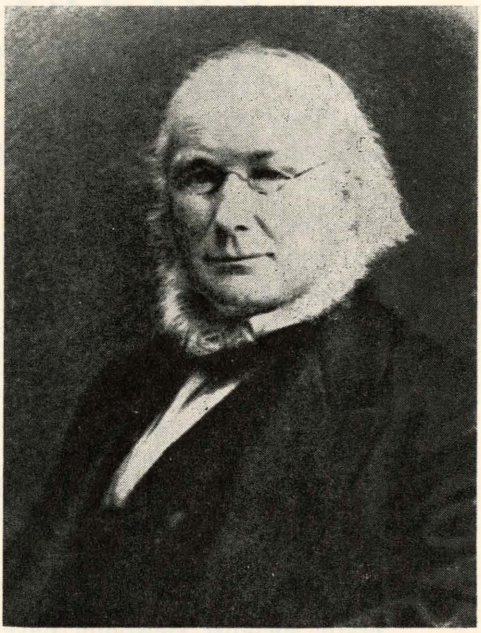

(Top) Robert Owen (1771-1858), British utopian socialist, philanthropist, and co-operator, who came to America to establish New Harmony Colony in Indiana (1825-28).

Middle) Horace Greeley (1811-72), editor of New York *Tribune* (1841-72) and follower of utopian doctrines of Fourier.

(Bottom) Edward Bellamy (1850-98), writer of most popular of American utopian romances, *Looking Backward* and *Equality*.

SOCIALISM IN THE UNITED STATES*

A BRIEF HISTORY

By HARRY W. LAIDLER, Ph.D.

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During the past century, the socialist movement thoughout the world has grown from a few thousand social pioneers, many of them exiles from their native lands, to a movement which embraces tens of millions of men and women and is molding the economic and political systems of many of the world's important countries. Parties with a democratic socialist viewpoint have, in numerous years since the thirties, provided the premierships in coalition or all-socialist governments in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Great Britain, Holland, Norway and Sweden among the democratic countries of Europe; in Israel in the Middle East; in Australia, New Zealand and Japan in the Pacific, and in Saskatchewan, Canada. Influential Socialist and Labor Parties likewise exist in Austria, Germany, Italy and Switzerland.

In numerous countries, it is true, the organized socialist movement is weak. But even in some of these countries, socialist ideas have had a remarkable effect on the country's institutions. In India the Indian Socialist Party is small numerically, but Premier Nehru, leader of the Congress Party, has long been regarded as a democratic socialist, and has greatly influenced public thinking in the direction of the democratic socialist goal. In such new republics as Burma and Indonesia in Southeast Asia, many of the government leaders favor social democracy.

The United States is one of the few great industrial nations where the Socialist or Labor or Social Democratic Party has not attained political stature. But even here, the socialist message has profoundly influenced our economic, political, and social thinking.

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* Reprinted, with a few changes, from the June and July, 1950 issues of the *Current History*, with the permission of the Editor.

The Utopians

The first stage of socialist thinking and agitation, as is well known, was the utopian stage of over a century ago. In the beginning of the nineteenth century in France and England, many utopian thinkers and doers, shocked at the gross inequalities, the economic wastes, and poverty which they witnessed all around them, determined to help bring about a society where justice, equality, and fraternity would be the order of the day. Many of them felt that the best way to do this was to organize cooperative colonies as experimental laboratories which would seek to carry out their ideas of a good society. They believed that, once the people witnessed the success of these colonies, other cooperative ventures would result, and gradually the competitive, profit-making society would be supplanted by a cooperative economy where men and women worked for service to the community, rather than for private profit.

The followers of these Utopians—of Cabet and Fourier of France, of Robert Owen, famous cotton mill owner and social crusader of England, and others—began to look around for the best places in which to establish these colonies. They looked across the sea and saw the vast, unsettled territories in America. They sent their emissaries to this country to prepare the ground for their social experiments. In this they had the help, among others, of such Americans as Albert Brisbane, father of the famous editor, Arthur Brisbane. After a trip to Europe in the early 1830's, Albert Brisbane interested the great Horace Greeley of the *New York Tribune* and others in the establishment of colonies in this country.

The result, particularly during the 1840's, was the organization of large numbers of colonies in the United States, the most famous of which was the Brook Farm experiment in New England. Most of the brilliant thinkers of that section of the country—Emerson, Thoreau, Lowell, Whittier, Greeley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Ellery Channing. Theodore Parker, George Ripley, and John S. Dwight—were, in one way or another, associated with it. The North American "Phalanx," developed by a number of New York idealists at Red Bank, New Jersey, in 1843, and New Harmony, established by Owen in Indiana twenty years earlier, should also be mentioned.

The colonies, for the most part, failed. It was found to be a difficult thing to establish little islands of Utopia, in the midst of an economic system run on entirely different principles. But some colonies survived, and the fundamental discussions evoked by this development and the later utopian writings of Edward Bellamy (1850-1898) and others contributed their part to the social thinking of America.

"The Forty-Eighters"

A small socialist movement of a non-utopian nature was likewise started in the first half of the nineteenth century by a number of Germans who came to the United States following the uprisings of 1830 and 1848. But the antislavery movement and the Civil War began to absorb the energies of the "forty-eighters," and the movement, to all intents and purposes, was suspended until after the war was over. In 1867, several groups of social radicals, primarily from Germany, reorganized their forces and formed a number of workingmen's unions with a socialistic objective in cities of the East and Middle West.

The Days of the 1st International

In 1872, Karl Marx, who had formed the First International of Workingmen eight years before, found that, while he was hard at work in the London libraries on his *Das Kapital* and other works, Bakunin and his anarchistic followers, with a philosophy of violence and insurrection, were securing a tight hold on the machinery of this body. At the Hague Congress of that year, as a means of preventing the International from falling into Bakunin's hands, Marx and his followers succeeded in having its headquarters removed to the United States. The small group of Socialists in this country rallied to its support, but they were weak and divided, and, in 1876, after a lingering illness, the First International, which had taken up headquarters in New York, was finally pronounced officially dead.

DeLeon and the Socialist Labor Party

Until the turn of the twentieth century, the principal socialist organization in the United States was the Socialist Labor Party. In the first decade of this movement the party members agitated vigorously for numerous reform measures and cooperated with a number of political and trade union groups. In 1886 they took an active part in the tense campaign for the election of Henry George, America's leading single taxer, for Mayor of the city of New York.

In 1890, however, the party admitted to its membership Daniel DeLeon, a native of Venezuela, who, after receiving his education in Germany, came to the United States and was granted a prize lectureship in international law at Columbia University. DeLeon, who had an incisive mind and a trenchant pen, quickly rose in 1892 to the editorship of the party's paper, *The People*. Once in the saddle, he used his position to mold all party members to his particular way of thinking.

One of his first crusades was that against the leaders of the trade-union movement whom he denounced for failing to organize along

industrial lines. He took them to task for asking for mere crumbs for labor rather than working for an entire change in the industrial system. He declared that some of the leaders of labor were ignorant, some corrupt. All, he affirmed, were unfit for leadership.

Secession from the S.L.P.

In 1895, after failing to capture the Knights of Labor, he organized the Socialist Trade and Labor Alliance and began to form unions in competition with the A.F.L. and the K. of L. The Alliance, however, only succeeded in antagonizing and alienating organized labor and in splitting the Socialist Party ranks.

Among other things, it led Morris Hillquit, and those who wished to work closely with the A.F.L. and other labor groups, and who refused to conform to the rigid discipline imposed by DeLeon in the party, to secede from the S.L.P., and to join with other groups to organize the Socialist Party of the United States. In 1900, those who remained in the S.L.P. under DeLeon struck out all immediate demands from their platform, declaring that such demands belonged to the infancy of the movement. For this action, they acquired the name of "impossibilists," and henceforth wielded little influence on the American scene.*

After seceding from the S.L.P., the Hillquit group looked around for new allies. It found these allies in a group called the Social Democracy that had shortly before been organized in the Middle West. This group was composed chiefly of the followers of Victor Berger, the Milwaukee socialist leader, who later became the first socialist Congressman in the United States, and of the followers of Eugene Victor Debs. Berger, a man of great energy and keen intelligence, a native of Austria-Hungary, had brought his socialist ideas from Europe, and had built a strong movement in this important Wisconsin city.

Eugene Victor Debs

Eugene Victor Debs had come to the socialist movement as a result of his experience in the trade-union movement in the United States. Born in Terre Haute, Indiana, of Alsatian parents, he became a worker in the railroad shops of his native city at an early age. Bitterly resenting the tragic conditions to which the railroad workers were then subjected, he joined the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen and became one of its most active workers. An increasingly popular figure in the union,

* The Socialist Labor Party has continued to exist until the present day. In 1948, its candidate for President received 29,000 votes as against 140,000 for Norman Thomas, Socialist Party candidate.

he was elected Grand Secretary and Treasurer of the Brotherhood, and editor and manager of their magazine, at 25. During the next 13 years, from 1880 to 1893, as secretary, he built up the organization from 60 to 226 lodges, wiped out a considerable debt, and made the union a force to be reckoned with in the railroad industry. In the meantime he served as city clerk of Terre Haute and as a Democratic member of the Indiana legislature.

Debs came to feel during these years, however, that the union was doing little or nothing for "the forgotten man," the unskilled worker, in the railroad industry. He gave up his job, which paid a salary of $4,000 a year, to form a more inclusive union organized along industrial lines. He formed the American Railway Union, receiving in his new position a salary of $900.

As leader of the A.R.U., he first tackled the job of improving the lot of the workers in the Great Northern Railroad where the scale of wages ranged from a dollar a day for trackmen and trainmen, to $80 a month for train dispatchers. The A.R.U. won a great victory over this giant railroad.

The railroads, however, decided to do everything in their power to annihilate this young union. They saw their opportunity when the workers for the Pullman Car Company voted to strike against intolerable conditions. Deb's union had advised against the strike, but, when it came, decided to support it.

The A.R.U. asked its members not to handle Pullman cars. The company pressed the government to send to the scene of action thousands of deputy marshals, armed and paid for by the railroads. They were followed by troops and state militia. An injunction was issued against Debs and others, forbidding interference with the trains. Debs was accused of violating the injunction, and sent to jail for contempt of court.

Debs entered jail a Democrat. In prison he read many socialist books and pamphlets, including the writings of Edward Bellamy, Blatchford and Kautsky. Berger visited him and delivered to him "the first impassioned message of socialism" Debs had ever heard. He left Woodstock jail a Socialist in spirit. However, in the election of 1896, he supported the Democratic candidate for President, William Jennings Bryan, "the silver-tongued orator." But in June, 1897, on the dissolution of the American Railway Union, he helped to form the Social Democracy, which Berger and some Eastern Socialists, notably Abraham Cahan of the *Jewish Daily Forward*, later joined. At its 1898 convention, the Social Democracy was captured by a group which felt that its main efforts should be directed to the organization of colonies, rather than

to independent political action. Debs, Berger, Cahan, and others revolted and formed the Social Democracy Party.

The 1900 Campaign

Two years later, in 1900, the Hillquit wing of the S.L.P. and the Social Democracy Party joined forces to put into the field as their candidate for President, Eugene Victor Debs. Debs was one of the first socialist leaders in the United States coming out of the ranks of the American working class. He talked in the language of the American worker—a leader as American as apple pie—waged a vigorous campaign, with McKinley and Bryan as his opponents, and, to the surprise of the old party leaders, received a vote of nearly 100,000. This vote was about three times the number received that year by the candidate of the Socialist Labor Party.

The Socialist Party's Prosperous Decade

Elated at the results of the campaign, the various forces backing Debs came together in a Unity Convention at Indianapolis, in June, 1901, and formed the Socialist Party.

The next 11 years of socialist activity in the United States, the period from 1901 to 1912, showed the greatest period of numerical growth and of political promise of any decade in the party's history. This period covered the presidencies of McKinley, Roosevelt, and Taft; it was the time of the country's second great period of trust formations; of the depressions or recessions of 1904 and 1907; of the first great forward march of organized labor, the American Federation of Labor having grown from 278,000 in 1898 to 1,676,000 in 1904. It was the period of the anthracite coal strike of 1902 in behalf of union recognition and the nine-hour day; of the development of the building trades; of the dramatic 1909 and 1910 strikes against sweatshop conditions in the men's and women's garment industry; of the organization of the Industrial Workers of the World and their dramatic strikes among the Western miners, lumbermen, and textile workers.

This period brought forth the muckrakers—Lincoln Steffens, Ray Stannard Baker, Ida Tarbell, Charles Edward Russell, Gustavus Myers —with their telling polemics against monopoly and the "malefactors of great wealth."

It produced a brilliant group of social novelists who had revolted against the extremes of wealth and poverty found in the Fifth Avenues and the East Sides of our crowded cities—Upton Sinclair with his *Jungle;* Jack London with his *Iron Heel;* Ernest Poole with his *The Harbor;* Frank Norris, David Graham Phillips, and James Oppenheim.

It was the time of vivid factual studies of the conditions of the poor—of John Graham Brook's *Social Unrest;* Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives;* Robert Hunter's *Poverty;* W. J. Ghent's *Our Benevolent Feudalism.*

It was the period of the remarkable development of Christian social and socialist literature—including the eloquent volumes *Christianity and the Social Crisis* by Walter Rauschenbusch and *Between Caesar and Jesus* by George D. Herron.

The period gave birth to the first group of books on socialism written by American socialists and published by regular publishers—books from the pens of Moris Hillquit, Robert Hunter, John Spargo, Louis B. Boudin, Edmond Kelly, W. J. Ghent, William English Walling, A. M. Simons, James Mackaye, Allan Benson, and many others.

Historians of the type of Charles Beard during these days were busy borrowing a leaf from Karl Marx, and emphasizing the importance of economic factors in molding our political and social institutions. John Dewey was engaged in relating philosophical and educational systems to democratic ends. Charles Steinmetz, the electrical wizard and active Socialist, was busy in showing how our technological progress must be accompanied by social progress if the United States and other lands were to avoid tragic dislocations and to utilize all of our resources for the common good.

Thorstein Veblen and Lester Ward were arousing the world of scholarship with their heretical volumes on economics and sociology. Social workers—Jane Addams, Frances Perkins, Florence Kelley among them—were increasingly emphasizing the need of getting at the causes of poverty, while trying immediately to ameliorate present day social conditions. And artists and cartoonists of the type of Art Young, John Sloan, Ryan Walker, and George Bellows, were portraying through pictures the topsy-turvy character, as they saw it, of much of our commercialized civilization.

It was the period also of the beginning of the Intercollegiate Socialist Society, formed to promote an intelligent interest in socialism among college men and women—a movement which, while committing no student member to a belief in socialism, stimulated thousands of the finest social idealists in our universities to do their part in the constructive solution of the social problems of the day.

It was the period of the organization of socialist schools—the Rand School of Social Science, led by W. J. Ghent, Algernon Lee, Bertha Mailly and others; the American Socialist College of Wichita, Kansas, and other institutions.

These and other forces had a tremendous impact on the socialist movement. Socialist magazines flourished, the *Appeal to Reason* run-

ning a circulation of about a half million. Socialist dailies sprang up in New York, Chicago and Milwaukee. Hundreds of thousands of pamphlets and leaflets were printed and distributed. Socialist lecture services were eagerly utilized. Party branches appeared throughout the nation. The Socialist Party membership grew from 16,000 in 1903 to 118,000 in 1912, a seven-fold growth in nine years. The socialist vote quadrupled between 1900 to 1904 to reach 400,000, doubling again from 1904 to 1912, when it reached 900,000. If this rate of increase continued, declared some socialist prophets, it was easy to see that the Socialist Party would became in the not distant future the dominant party of the land.

As for the country's cities, Socialists won control during those days of Milwaukee, Schenectady, and other cities. In 1912, in fact, socialist mayors headed 56 cities, while over 1,000 dues-paying members of the party were occupying public office in various cities and states. One Socialist, the Milwaukee editor, Victor Berger, was elected to Congress.

Socialists were active in the trade-union movement. In 1912, Max Hayes, a prominent Cleveland Socialist, running against Samuel Gompers for President of the A.F.L., obtained about one-third of the votes cast. In the needle trades of New York and other cities, the leadership was almost entirely socialist.

The party did much during this period in the promotion of social and labor legislation, and, time and time again, after the party members had initiated legislation, and had joined with free-lance reformers to popularize it, the country found socialist legislative proposals taken over by the major parties and enacted into legislation, usually, however, in a watered-down form.

Although there were many differences of opinion within the Socialist Party during the period 1901 to 1912 as to the best procedures to follow, the party members were so busy building and so enthusiastic about the results obtained, that these difficulties failed to lead to splits.

The Syndicalistic Issue—Expulsion of Haywood

During the following decade, from 1912 to 1922, however, a number of things happened both in the United States and abroad which decimated the party ranks. First of these was the controversy of a number of years' standing between the moderate Socialists of the type of Morris Hillquit and Victor Berger, and the extremists. The moderates believed that progress toward socialism would come primarily through political action, the election of Socialists to public office, and the gradual, peaceful and democratic transfer of industry from private to public ownership. The extremists, like William D. Haywood, the

leader of the I.W.W., were more syndicalist than socialist in their philosophy.

Haywood laid more emphasis on economic action than he did on parliamentary activity. He believed with syndicalists that strikes, leading to a general strike, and such tactics as sabotage, would be more effective in bringing about fundamental change.

Haywood was for a while a member of the Executive Committee of the party. But, after a long and bitter controversy, the party, in 1912, passed an amendment to its constitution to the effect that anyone advocating the use of sabotage and violence would not be eligible for membership. Such tactics, the amendment declared, "made for guerrilla warfare, demoralized those who employed these methods and opened the door to the *agent provocateur*." Haywood was expelled from the party's Executive Committee in 1913, and took with him a number of his adherents. Many left the party because they disliked the controversy engendered in party gatherings.

The 1912 Campaign

Then, in 1912, some of the former adherents of the party, particularly among the social workers' group, were drawn into the ranks of the Progressive or Bull Moose Party, led by Theodore Roosevelt. They thought his was a more effective instrument for achieving immediate social reforms. Others, listening to the eloquent addresses of Woodrow Wilson on the New Freedom, decided to vote for the former Princeton President and thus prevent the re-election of William Howard Taft. Debs, in this campaign received around 900,000 votes.

Socialists and World War I

The most vigorous disagreements within the party from 1912 on were, however, those caused by events emanating from abroad. The first of such events was the breaking out of World War I. The majority of the party opposed America's entrance into the war—some because they were opposed to all wars, or all wars between capitalist nations; some because they believed that, if America remained neutral, it would be in a better position to help to mediate a just and lasting peace.

Others favored the most vigorous prosecution of the war by the United States as a means of crushing German militarism and imperialism. A number of party "intellectuals" in 1916, with the war issue casting a heavy shadow over the country, decided to support Woodrow Wilson for President rather than Allan Benson, a popular writer on social problems, the Socialist Party candidate.*

* Benson's vote was about 590,000, a 30 percent reduction from the Debs vote in 1912.

When the United States entered the war and the Socialist Party passed the St. Louis anti-war resolution, the 1916 dissidents were joined by other writers and publicists who dropped their party membership either temporarily or permanently.

During the war, the party's voting strength increased in such cities as New York, which, in 1917, during the Hillquit campaign, sent strong delegations to the city and state legislatures. The party's opposition to war, on the other hand, led to the imprisonment of Eugene Victor Debs and a number of other socialist leaders and rank and filers, to the breaking up of many party meetings, and to the disorganization of the party machinery.

Party Split Over Russian Communism

But a more important cause of disruption of the party in the period 1912-1922 was the Russian Revolution of 1917, followed by the establishment of the Soviet Republic in the form of a Communist Party dictatorship. Many Socialists in America, particularly those who had come from Russia and surrounding countries, were mistakenly of the opinion that the proletarian revolution starting in Russia would soon sweep over the world like a prairie fire, engulfing the United States. They thought that it was their duty to mobilize the masses for the revolution in this country. The majority of the party, however, declared that they saw no evidence of a revolutionary crisis in the United States, and that the job of Socialists here, as in other democratic countries, was to use the ballot and other peaceful instruments of change to bring about a cooperative system of industrial society. The extremists, at a convention held in Chicago in July, 1919, split from the Socialist Party and formed the Communist and Communist Labor Parties.* The Socialist Party membership, as a result, declined to 27,000. In its 1920 campaign, Debs, while serving in prison for alleged anti-war activities, was again the Socialist Party candidate for President, and received

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* The Communist Labor Party soon died. The Communist Party went through numerous stages of development and the party split into the Stalinites, the Lovestonites, the Trotskyites, and other groups. At present writing there exist the Communist party, the Socialist Workers Party, a Trotskyite offshoot of the C.P., whose presidential candidate obtained 13,600 votes in 1948, and the Workers Party, led by Max Shachtman. For developments of these parties, see Dan Bell in *Socialism and American Life,* Vol. 1, pp. 334-45 and bibliography in Vol. II of *Socialism and American Life.*

For an exposition of communist tactics from a communist viewpoint, see William Z. Foster's *Toward Soviet America* (Coward-McCann, 1932). Paul M. Sweezy's *Socialism* (McGraw-Hill 1949) is sympathetic. For a criticism of communist tactics see John L. Childs and George S. Counts, *America, Russia and the Communist Party in the Postwar World* (John Day, 1943); Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess—The Truth About American Communism* (Dutton, 1949); James Oneal, *Communism* (Dutton, 1947); Eduard Heimann, *Communism, Fascism or Democracy* (Norton, 1938).

920,000 votes, the largest number of votes accorded to him in his four candidacies.

The party secessions of the decade 1912-1922 resulting from disagreements over syndicalism and sabotage, over Bull Mooseism, Wilsonism, war policies, and bolshevism, however, had greatly weakened the party and left its membership less than one-fourth of that of 1912.

Conference for Progressive Political Action

Viewing this situation, many Socialists began to question whether the Socialist Party was to be the chief vehicle for bringing about the change from capitalism to socialism. They began to look around for other groups that might join with it in forming a political party.

In their search for such allies, they found a number of groups in Wisconsin, led by Senator Robert M. LaFollette; in Minnesota, North Dakota, and other states where the Non-Partisan League was active, and in a number of labor unions, particularly the needle trades, the machinists, and the railroad brotherhoods.

Labor had had a bitter struggle with capital after World War I. The membership in the trade-union movement had shrunk from 4,000,000 during the war to about 2,500,000, and many industrialists were actively engaged in the post-war years in trying to break the back of the trade-union movement. The unions had lost a number of crucial strikes and were on the defensive. A number of them, particularly among the railroad unions, had turned increasingly to political action as the way out. The railroad brotherhoods, among other things, had begun the agitation for the Plumb Plan, which involved public ownership of railroads, with threefold control by workers, consumers, and technical and administrative staffs. It was in the midst of this situation that a number of unions formed the Conference for Progressive Political Action, headed by William J. Johnson, President of the Machinists.

The trade-union chiefs invited the Socialists to designate one of their leaders to serve on the governing committee, and Morris Hillquit, brilliant labor lawyer and leading socialist writer and theoretician, was selected for that position.

The LaFollette Campaign

For several years before the 1924 campaign, the C.P.P.A. considered the possibility of launching a new party, and, in 1924, following the nomination of Calvin Coolidge on the Republican ticket and John W. Davis, attorney for J. P. Morgan and other corpoprate groups, on the Democratic ticket, the committee threw its support to LaFollette for President.

At its Cleveland convention, held at the same time as that of the Conference for Progressive Political Action, the Socialists earnestly discussed whether the party would again nominate a candidate of its own—Debs had continued to run for re-election in every campaign except that of 1916—and, by a considerable majority, the convention delegate decided to back LaFollette in the 1924 campaign.

The Progressives waged a whirlwind political battle. The A.F.L. officially endorsed the Progressive ticket and LaFollette received nearly five million votes, surpassing that of the Democrats in several states.

Socialists hoped that LaFollette, the Railroad Brotherhoods, and other trade-union groups would look upon the support received during this campaign as justifying their launching of a new national Farmer-Labor party of which the Socialist Party would be a constituent part. But LaFollette finished the campaign a sick man, physically incapable of giving time or energy to the creation of a new political alignment. Most of the legislators who had gone along with the LaFollette effort returned to their respective parties. The Railroad Brotherhoods received concessions from the railroad owners. The nation began to enjoy a period of prosperity under the Coolidge administration, and the new party movement went with the winds.

It was now up to the Socialist Party to devote itself again to re-building its own forces, and to running independent candidates. The failure of the Socialists in the LaFollette campaign to lay the foundations for a party somewhat similar to that of the British Labor Party was a great disappointment to many party leaders.

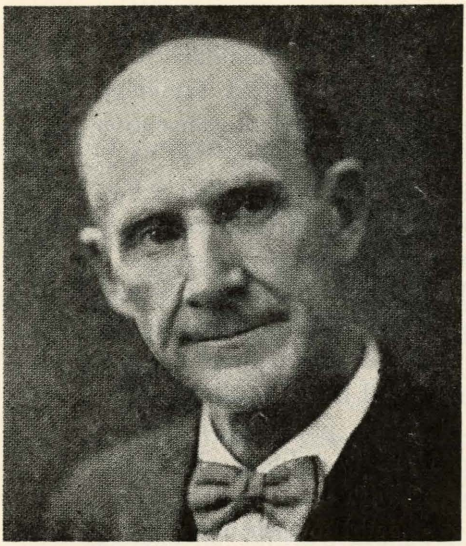
Norman Thomas, Socialist Presidential Candidate

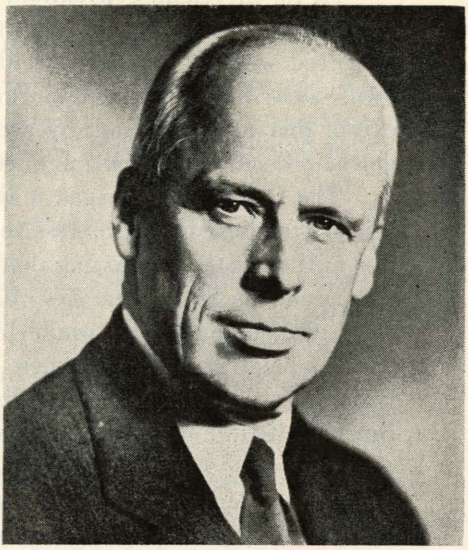
Two years after the LaFollette campaign, in October, 1926, the party lost its most outstanding and magnetic political leader, Eugene Victor Debs. In 1928, the party nominated for President a comparatively new figure in the movement, Norman Thomas, who entered the party during the Morris Hillquit campaign of 1917.

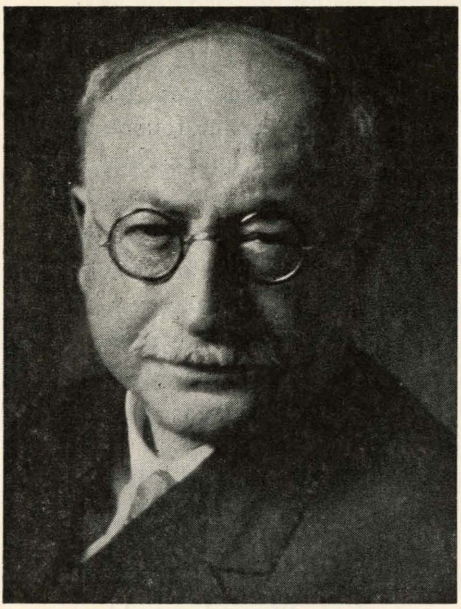
In height, in eloquence, in courage, in bitter hatred of injustices, in high moral fervor, and in passionate devotion to the ideal of brotherhood, Debs and Thomas showed great similarities.

In other respects they differed greatly. Debs had little schooling, went to work as a mere boy, and spent most of his life, prior to his leadership of the socialist movement, as a railroad worker and active leader of labor.

Thomas, the son of a Presbyterian minister with a large family, found it necessary to earn part of his way through college. He was a graduate of Princeton University—the class's valedictorian at Commencement—and a graduate of Union Theological Seminary. Before





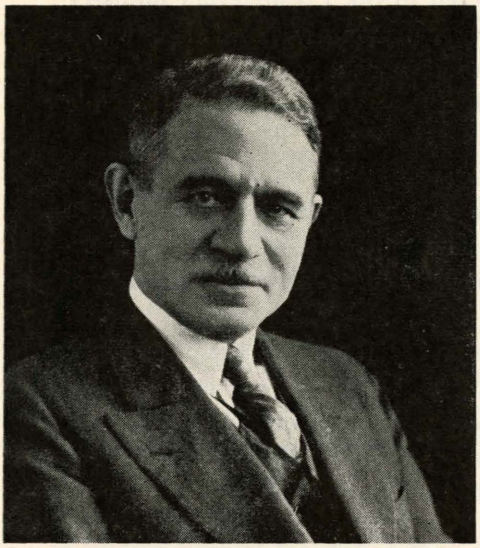


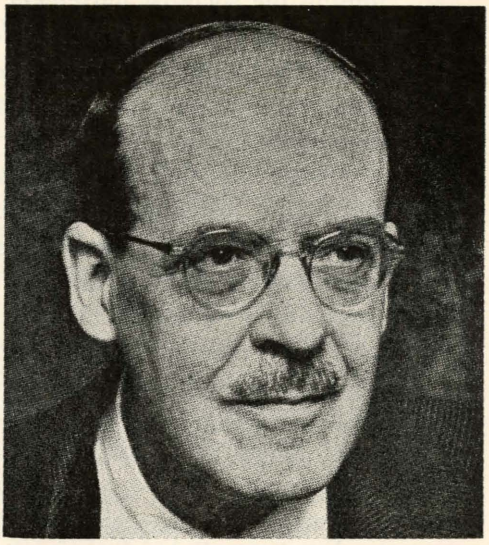
(Upper Left) Eugene Victor Debs (1855-1926), labor leader and Socialist Party candidate for President of the U.S.A. 1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, 1920.

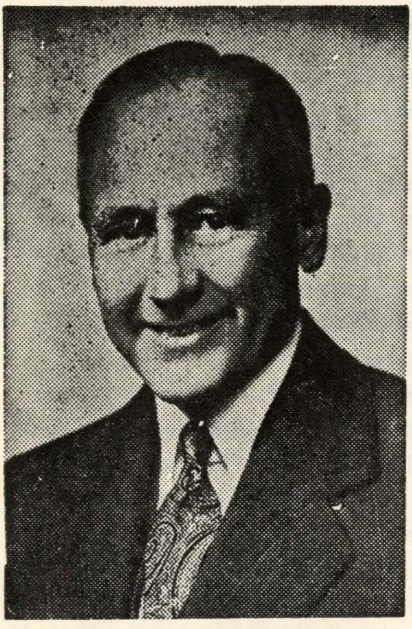
(Upper Right) Norman Thomas (1884-), six times Socialist Party candidate for President from 1928-1948; writer, lecturer, former clergyman.

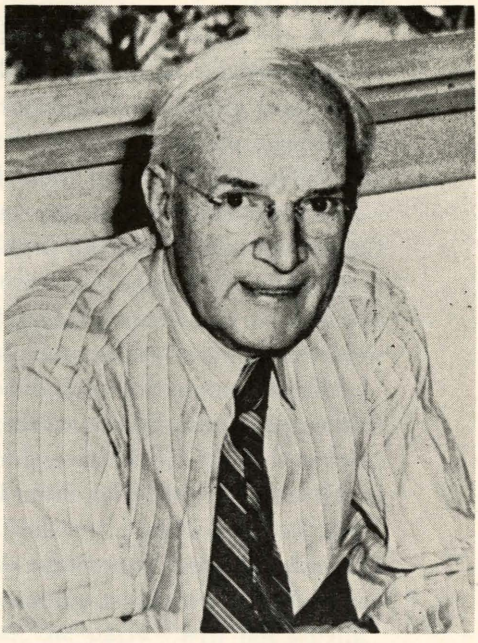
(Lower Left) Victor L. Berger (1860-1929), first Socialist Congressman (1911-13); socialist editor and leader of Milwaukee Socialists.

(Lower Right) Meyer London (1871-1926), labor attorney, Socialist Congressman (1915-19) from New York.









(Upper Left) Morris Hillquit (1869-1933), labor attorney, outstanding socialist leader and author.

(Upper Right) Algernon Lee (1873-), socialist educator; President, Rand School of Social Science; former chairman Social Democratic Federation.

(Lower Right) Upton Sinclair (1878-), famous socialist novelist and pamphleteer.

(Lower Left) Harry W. Laidler, (1884-), author of books on socialist history, theory and practice.

joining the socialist movement he served in the Presbyterian ministry and as editor of *The World Tomorrow*, a monthly devoted to world peace. He first became interested in the movement not as a result of his experiences in the class conflict of those days, but as a result of his opposition to war.

Debs preached the class struggle; presented situations in white and black; drove home his points by constant repetition; presented a few, readily understood reasons for his socialist position, and, in personal contact, showed genuine affection for the workers of the movement whom he met.

The content of Thomas' addresses on social and economic questions was more complex than that of Debs. He brought to bear on their discussion a remarkably wide knowledge of the latest development in all fields of thought, and while driving home many points with eloquence, humor and feeling, was much more the scholar in the presentation of his position. His popularity was wide. Nevertheless, many who declared in campaign after campaign that intellectually Thomas stood head and shoulders above his opponents, failed to cast their ballots for him on election day.

In the ensuing presidential campaign of 1928, Thomas and James H. Maurer, the popular President of the Pennsylvania Federation of Labor and a socialist legislator who did much to pioneer in the fight for old-age pensions, waged a vigorous campaign, with Herbert Hoover and Alfred E. Smith as their Republican and Democratic opponents.

Republicans in the gay late 1920's were claiming that the New Capitalism had solved the problem of economic depressions and many, in the Hoover campaign, were promising two chickens in every pot and two cars in every garage. America was entering, many economists were declaring, a permanent plateau of prosperity.

Trade unions found it difficult to organize in those days of almost full employment. Many workers thought that their destiny would be safe in the hands of the engineer, Herbert Hoover. Others had faith in Alfred E. Smith, who, from his background on the East Side of New York, knew how the other half lived, and who had done a good job as Governor of New York State. At election time only 267,000 votes were counted in the socialist column. Herbert Hoover was elected President.

The New Deal

Hardly, however, had the election results been declared than an economic slump began, followed by the Wall Street crash and the beginning of the greatest economic depression in the history of the country. In the next presidential election in 1932, the voters, critical of Hoover's handling of the economic crisis, elected Franklin D. Roose-

velt. The stock of the Socialist Party, however, had gone up during the previous four years, and Thomas and Maurer received in November, 1932, a vote of nearly 900,000, as compared with a little over a quarter of a million in 1928.

Then came the New Deal legislation. Roosevelt and his followers adopted immediate demand after immediate demand from the platform of the Socialist Party. They introduced legislation in behalf of old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, minimum wages, shorter hours, collective bargaining, public works, public housing, steeper progressive income taxation, and the extension of public electric power.

The trade-union membership, which had sunk to about 3,000,000 in the late 1920's, increased to nearly 15,000,000 by the latter part of the 1930's. In the light of these developments, many labor progressives and radicals swung their support from the Socialist Party to the New Deal. The socialist movement found itself in the curious position of having collectively, and through individual Socialists, greater influence in molding social legislation than ever before, while finding it increasingly difficult to obtain a large membership and following as a party.

Appeal for United Front

The years 1932 and 1936 were difficult years for the Socialist Party in another respect. Those were the years when Hitler became master of Germany, and when fascism overwhelmed Austria. With this development, the Communists throughout the world, who had formerly denounced Socialists as social fascists, turned the hand of alleged friendship toward democratic Socialists and urged them and other progressives to join with Communists in a "united front" against fascism.

Emergence of Social Democratic Federation

This wooing of the Socialists created sharp differences of opinion within the Socialist Party of the United States. One group declared that the Communists' invitation to cooperate on certain issues with which both groups were concerned should be accepted. Other members insisted that neither the ends of democracy nor of peace could be furthered through united action with the followers of Lenin and Stalin.

In 1934, the Socialist Party, at its convention in Detroit, adopted a new declaration of principles which declared, among other things, that, should the capitalist system collapse, the party "will not shrink from the responsibility of organizing and maintaining a government under the workers' rule." A minority of the party members declared that this passage was communistic, on the ground that it envisaged the obtaining of power through undemocratic means. Proponents of the resolution, on the other hand, pointed to that part of the resolution which declared that the party "seeks to attain its objectives by peaceful

and orderly means", as proof of its democratic character.

Differences of opinion over this resolution, over united-front activities, over tacit support of major party candidates, and clashes of personalities, led, in the spring of 1936, to a split in the party and to the formation by the dissident group of the Social Democratic Federation, committed to a program of democratic socialism. The Socialist Party, in 1936, further modified the Detroit resolution in an effort to eliminate any misundertsanding as to the democratic means and aims of the party. The party in its later programs repudiated all attempts on the part of Communists to involve it in united front activities and directed its activities increasingly to opposition to all totalitarianism, whether on the right or on the left.

The S.D.F., which had its greatest strength in New York State, later joined in that state with the American Labor Party and, after the A.L.P. fell under the control of the Communists, with the Liberal Party, in their electoral campaigns.

In the 1936 campaign, as a result of the influence of Roosevelt and the new split in the party, the vote for Thomas and George Nelson, a farm leader from Wisconsin, shrank from the 900,000 of 1932 to 187,000, less than that in 1928.

The remainder of the 1930's, the fourth decade of Socialist Party activity, was spent in working for more adequate measures to reduce the army of the unemployed, later absorbed in military preparations; to strengthen social security laws, advance public ownership, and keep America out of World War II. In 1940, the party ran Thomas for President and Maynard Krueger, Assistant Professor of Economics of the University of Chicago, for Vice-President, and polled 117,000 votes.

World War II

Then came the Second World War. After Pearl Harbor, Socialists critically supported the war, though urging that all efforts be made toward a democratic peace that would lead to the ending of war. The platform in 1944 called for (1) the winning of the earliest possible peace that would last, followed by the formation of an international organization to remove the causes of war; (2) the social ownership and democratic control of monopolies, semi-monopolies, and other exploitive industries; (3) the establishment of equality of rights and obligations among all races; and (4) the building of a democratic socialist party with mass support. Thomas and Darlington Hoopes, a Reading, Pennsylvania, attorney, received in this mid-war presidential campaign, only 80,000 votes, less than the Debs vote of 1900. Four years later, Thomas and Tucker Smith, another economist and former labor leader,

after a campaign with better publicity than in any year after 1932, increased the vote from 80,000 to 140,000.

In the early fifties, the party has continued to agitate for social legislation, to oppose totalitarianism on the right and the left alike, and to seek to educate the people in regard to the constructive achievements of democratic socialist movements abroad. In 1952 it ran Darlington Hooper for President and Samuel H. Friedman for Vice-President.

Norman Thomas, six times presidential candidate, is continuing to reach, through his lectures, radio broadcasts, and writings, great numbers of people, and his influence in many a domestic and international movement is widespread. He is held in high regard by men and women of all political faiths.

Socialists are still a political force in several localities, notably in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Bridgeport, Connecticut, where there are socialist Mayors. In Bridgeport, Jasper McLevy, Socialist (for some time unaffiliated with the Socialist Party U.S.A.), in 1952 headed the city government for the tenth time. Thousands of men and women with a socialist background and training are leaders in many powerful unions, notably in the needle trades and the auto industry, and in many causes for the social advance. Many socialist leaders have, however, become convinced that the S.P. is not destined to follow the example of the British Labor Party, and become successively the third, the second, and, finally, the first party in membership and influence in the country. The extent to which Socialists should run candidates for public office except where "specific circumstances present affirmative reasons for considering such campaigns advantageous", has recently been the subject of much debate in the Socialist Party. In New York State, Socialist Party members have recently supported certain Liberal party candidates who have not been candidates of the major parties, among them Rudolph Halley, Liberal candidate for President of the Council in 1951. As the ideological differences between the Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Federation have almost ceased to exist, the two organizations have cooperated increasingly on specific issues and have discussed the question of organic unity. They have likewise formed a committee for joint representation at meetings of the Socialist International.

From the foregoing it can be seen that the Socialist Party of the United States did not, in its first half-century of struggle, become the major political party which its founders expected it to be. It has not inaugurated the Cooperative Commonwealth in the United States. And yet it has exerted a profound influence on the economic, political and cultural life of the country.

Obstacles Faced by American Socialists

What have been the reasons for the party's failure to graduate thus far from a minor to a major political party?

1. The chief reason I believe is to be found in the fact that the United States is a comparatively new country, blessed with untold natural resources, with a comparatively sparse population, a country affording many opportunities to labor to rise from the working class to the ranks of the owning class.

For many years, furthermore, if a worker was faced with loss of employment, instead of remaining in his home town and joining with his fellows to seek a common remedy for the workers' plight, he would pack up, go West, obtain free land or a job in an expanding city or industry, and start life over again. He sought to remedy his condition by individual, rather than by social action.

2. The heterogeneity of the population and the difficulty of the national groups with roots in other countries—many of them speaking their mother tongue—has, in the second place, been an obstacle to socialist organization. This was particularly true of the movement between the Civil War and 1900. Although, as the twentieth century advanced, the majority of Socialists were natives of the United States, in the crisis of 1919 many foreign language federations joined the party for the purpose of imposing on it tactics which might have been fitting for a movement in other lands, but which were utterly unfitted to the American situation.

Misunderstanding of Socialist Aims

3. A third reason for the slow growth of the socialist movement in this country has been misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the aims of socialism, a misunderstanding due partly to the fault of many socialist propagandists, and partly to the conscious effort of reactionary groups to discredit the movement.

Many opponents of socialism have represented the leaders of socialism as urging a highly centralized, bureaucratic federal ownership and control of all industry, and the utter submission of the individual to the state.

Socialists of course do not believe in the public ownership of consumer goods. They do not believe in the public ownership of all industry. They contend that while, under socialism, the basic industries should be publicly owned, there would be many fields where industry should be controlled by voluntary cooperative groups, particularly in opinion-making services and in retail distribution, where consumers' cooperatives have flourished. Certain services, as in agriculture and

newly-developed industries, might well be left in private hands, under proper provisions for the protection of the worker, the consumer, and the general public.

American Socialists have long pointed out that public ownership of basic industries alone does not constitute socialism. Socialism is impossible without democracy and flourishes only under a democratic form of government (1) where there exists freedom of speech, of assembly, of press, or organization, of worship, of scientific and cultural research; (2) where the government is controlled by, and responsive to, the will of the plain people of the country; and (3) where the publicly-owned industries are *democratically* operated, and give an adequate chance to workers, consumers and technical and administrative staffs to have their say in the determination of policies.

Socialists are opposed to bureaucratic and autocratic control of industry and to regimentation of the individual. They are opposed to both economic and political dictatorship and to totalitarianism in every form.

In the operation of publicly-owned industry, Socialists favor as much decentralization as is consistent with social efficiency. They would not have all publicly-owned industries centrally controlled in Washington, but would have city, state, and regional units assume control of those services which could be adequately performed on a local basis. We are finding today many attempts to form working partnerships between various government units in our public educational, housing, health, and other services.

Socialists have also favored increasingly in recent years the operation of public industries through the public corporation, which has shown a capacity to eliminate unnecessary red tape, to operate in a flexible fashion, and to secure administrators appointed not for their loyalty to politicians on-the-make, but for their ability, integrity, industry, and public spirit.

A proper understanding of the goals of the Socialist Party as above described would probably have resulted in a much larger following than it has attained.

Our Electoral System

A fourth obstacle in the way of socialist growth in this country has been the character of the electoral system. In Great Britain, the electors vote for members of Parliament, but not for the Prime Minister. The success or failure in an election is determined by the number of members of that party elected to Parliament. In a presidential election in the United States, however, almost all attention is concentrated on the candidates for President. In each state a few votes cast one way

or the other for a Presidential candidate, moreover, might determine whether the entire block of electoral votes in each state would swing to one party or the other, thus deciding the election and the future of the country during the succeeding four years. If there seems to be a substantial difference in the views of the candidates of the major parties, may citizens with socialist leanings will vote for the candidate of the Republican or Democratic Party which he regards as the lesser of two evils. Thus, in innumerable instances, a minority party such as the Socialist Party often fails to obtain the vote of its ideological adherents because of fear that the less liberal or more conservative of the Presidential candidates might be elected.

Trade Unions and Socialist Political Action

A fifth obstacle to the development of a Socialist Party with a labor basis was the comparative smallness until recently of the trade-union movement in this country and the attitude of its leadership toward political action and social legislation. For four decades under Samuel Gompers, the A.F.L. was one of the chief critics of social insurance systems on the ground that anything that induced organized labor to depend on the government for the advancement of the workers' living standards, rather than on trade-union action, would weaken the unions. For years also, the fact that Daniel DeLeon and many Socialists had sought to organize dual unions and that Debs and others had sought to build up the I.W.W., created an antagonism between the S.P. and organized labor. In more recent years communist advocacy of a labor party has greatly weakened the movement among trade unionists for independent political action.

Further Obstacles to Socialist Progress

Other reasons for the failure of the party to achieve greater electoral success were:

1. The splits in the movement resulting largely from the impact of developments originating abroad—the two World Wars, and the rise of syndicalism, bolshevism, and fascism;

2. The personal popularity among the workers of such old party leaders as Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt, President Wilson, and others;

3. The desire of the people to try reforms under the present order as a means of eliminating the social evils with which they were confronted before experimenting with more fundamental measures of social change urged by the Socialist Party.

4. The taking over by the old parties of reforms first initiated by the Socialists. These reforms include measures in behalf of woman

suffrage, progressive income, inheritance, corporation and franchise taxes, workmen's compensation, old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, a minimum wage, a shorter work week, the abolition of child labor, effective factory inspection, conservation of natural resources, public works for the unemployed, the curbing of the power of the courts to issue injunctions in labor disputes, the establishment of a Department of Labor, etc.

What of the Future?

As for the future, it seems likely that, despite vigorous opposition to steps toward further social control leading to some type of socialist economy, a definite trend toward public and cooperative ownership and democratic control of industry and the social services is likely to be observed in this country.

This trend is likely to be accelerated through the effort of the people to conserve our diminishing natural resources; to avoid mass unemployment; to remedy the evils of private monopoly; to reduce living costs; to guarantee reasonable conditions of work; to insure decent housing to low and middle income groups; to advance educational, recreational, and health services; to provide to the ordinary American security against want in times of sickness, accident, unemployment, and old age, and to prepare the country for national defense.

The trend will be accelerated by the change that has for sometime been going on in our economic system. At the beginning of capitalism, when the person or persons who owned a shop or a factory was usually both the owner and the promoter and manager, the defenders of capitalism maintained that private ownership provided the only way of spurring on management to do efficient work. For, under private ownership, the more efficient a person was as manager, the more profit would be obtained as the owner of the plant.

Today, however, in the average big corporation which conducts such a large part of the business of the country, management and ownership are separate. The owner usually is the inactive stockholder who may live miles away from the plant which he in part owns, and may know little or nothing about its operation. The manager, on the other hand, may have no share in the ownership and may depend on a salary for services rendered, not upon a profit, for his main incentive.

If the plant were transferred from private to public ownership, the manager could, in all probability, be relied upon to do as good a job for the community in return for a salary as he was doing for an absentee stockholder. The old argument about retaining private ownership as a means of providing adequate incentives for management has today little validity in our giant corporation set-up.

Finally, the trend toward socialism is likely in the future to be furthered by the growth of the labor and the cooperative movements, and by the growing experiments in democratic social planning in many of the countries abroad.

Thus far the American people have failed to demand, as did the Labor government in Britain, any extensive measures of public ownership in the industrial field, but if industry continues to concentrate as it has in the past, and if the present order fails in the future to avoid depressions and mass unemployment, there is likely to be an increased demand for a program similar to that of the British Labor Party.

If or when that times comes, the question will arise as to whether either of the present parties will be regarded as a vehicle for fundamental social change or whether labor and liberal groups, committed to the democratic way of life, will create a new party as the British workers did, and proceed to the building up of that party, with the Socialist Party supporting, officially or unofficially, this new alignment.

The increase in numbers, in unity, and in political and social consciousness of the trade-union movement; the growth of the cooperative movement, and the development of a more socially-visioned farm leadership in a number of sections of the country are today providing a broader base for an effective farmer-labor party than in the past. Some contend that such a party will develop as a result of realignments within existing parties. Many other vigorously maintain that a new political party must be developed if America is to meet and successfully solve the pressing problems of our atomic age.

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